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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000129

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS
SINGAPORE FOR DAO
DEFENSE FOR OSD/POLICY

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SUBJECT: BRUNEI TO ADMIRAL KEATING: WE NEED AMERICANS IN
REGION

Classified By: Ambassador Emil Skodon, reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During PACOM Commander Admiral Keating's visit to Brunei, we heard one clear and consistent message: in Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah's phrasing, "we need the Americans around this region." In a wide-ranging conversation, the Sultan welcomed U.S.-Brunei mil-mil activities including the annual CARAT exercise, regular ship visits and proposed intelligence sharing activities. Crown Prince al-Muhtadee Billah impressed us for having made steps to grow into his role as heir to the Sultan. Chief of Defense Pehin Major General Halbi and other military leaders briefed on progress in achieving the goals of the Defense White Paper 2007, highlighting their interest in acquiring unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Foreign Minister II Pehin Lim Jock Seng shared the sense of ASEAN nations that dialogue with China was not leading to progress on difficult issues, including sharing the resources of the South China Sea. END SUMMARY.

SULTAN "WARMLY ENGAGED"

¶2. (U) PACOM Commander Admiral Timothy Keating visited Brunei April 8-9, meeting with Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, Crown Prince al Muhtadi Billah, Chief of Defense Pehin Major General Halbi and the armed forces service chiefs, and Foreign Minister II Pehin Lim Jock Seng. Admiral Keating also visited Royal Brunei Navy Headquarters in Muara, riding out by helicopter from the Ministry of Defense for a brief, aerial view of Brunei. The Admiral also granted an exclusive interview to the Borneo Bulletin, Brunei's most widely read daily newspaper.

¶3. (C) Admiral Keating led off his meeting with the Sultan by raising the importance the U.S. attaches to our counter-terrorism cooperation, as violent extremism poses a threat to both our countries. Keating emphasized the importance of our impending agreement to commence military to military intelligence sharing, to which the Sultan responded that intel sharing "is very important" to Brunei. Turning to Southeast Asian regional security writ large, the Sultan told the admiral that "we need the Americans around this region."

14. (C) The Sultan also welcomed the U.S. commitment to continue exercises and engagements at a pace comfortable both to Brunei and the U.S. The Sultan acknowledged that exercises, such as CARAT, "are very beneficial to us." Responding to Admiral Keating's comment on the value to our young sailors to see the world, especially a small, modern, prosperous, and moderate majority Muslim nation, the Sultan noted that visits by U.S. Navy ships are "very good for our young people". The Sultan characterized overall U.S.-Brunei military to military activities as "very good."

15. (C) Over the course of their discussion, the Sultan asked for Admiral Keating's views about China, the Korean Peninsula, and the Middle East Peace Process. The admiral responded that China's military modernization efforts were of some concern. The Chinese say they only want to protect what is theirs. That, s fair, Keating observed, but their development of offensive weapons that endanger U.S. ships "makes us a bit suspicious of them."

16. (C) On Korea, the admiral said he was cautiously optimistic about the prospects for DPRK de-nuclearization and stability on the peninsula. The Sultan agreed that things seemed to be "moving in the right way."

17. (C) On the Middle East Peace Process, the admiral commended Brunei for considering participation in UNIFIL in Lebanon. The admiral drew on his experiences while stationed in Bahrain to confirm that while our Arab friends are critical of U.S. policies in some respects, he believed they appreciated the U.S. commitment to peace in the region.

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18. (C) The atmospherics during Admiral Keating's discussion with the Sultan were excellent. Following this meeting, General Halbi commented that he had never seen the Sultan so warmly engaged with a foreign military visitor.

Crown Prince Engaged

19. (C) Admiral Keating's call on Crown Prince Billah covered much of the same ground as his meeting with the Sultan. The Crown Prince queried the Admiral about China's arms modernization and possible troubles surrounding the Olympics.

Keating emphasized importance of a broad, collective international approach to dealing with China and need to encourage China to be a "responsible nation." The Crown Prince was supportive of the U.S. intent to remain engaged both with ASEAN and bilaterally with countries in the region.

While the Crown Prince did more listening than talking, he was very attentive and several times asked follow-up questions that indicated he was both following and thinking about what Admiral Keating had to say. (Comment: This is a notable evolution from Billah's performance during the 2006 call by Admiral Keating's predecessor at PACOM, Admiral Fallon, when the Crown Prince actively ducked substantive topics and limited himself to the comment "We desire good relations with all countries.")

General Halbi and Military Brief on Strategy

110. (C) Over several meetings with the Admiral, General Halbi praised the CARAT military exercises' value to the Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF). Halbi's staff briefed on the Defense White Paper 2007, focusing on plans to procure UAVs. Halbi praised our proposed military intelligence exchange as ready to begin pending U.S. action, causing Military Intelligence Chief, Col. Ra'emi Malek some discomfort. (Note: Col. Ra'emi has been holding off on beginning this exchange until his replacement is named, even though PACOM is

ready to proceed with military intelligence exchange and cooperation.) Admiral Keating mentioned the potential for Non-Commissioned Officer professional development training and exchanges if Brunei is interested.

Foreign Ministry: ASEAN-China Dialogue Uneven

¶11. (C) Over lunch at the Ambassador's residence, Foreign Minister II Pehin Lim Jock Seng and most of his Ministry's Permanent Secretaries briefed on the ASEAN-China dialogue. Brunei is currently serving as China Dialogue Partner for ASEAN. Lim assessed that China had been very sophisticated in its public relations strategy vis-a-vis ASEAN countries. China has pushed a public line of peaceful relations and working together towards mutual prosperity. However, China had been crafty at pocketing concessions on opening trade in goods with ASEAN while dragging its feet on progress in investment and services chapters of a free trade agreement. Along similar lines, China had effectively ducked the Myanmar (Burma) issue by telling ASEAN, "you take the lead and we'll follow."

¶12. (C) Lim said that ASEAN was trying to encourage China to be more transparent by pre-announcing its military exercises. This was part of a larger, but unsuccessful strategy to build on the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (SCS). ASEAN, Lim said, had mooted the idea of joint development of SCS resources. China's response had been, in Lim's paraphrase, "why should we, it's ours." The Philippines and Malaysia had been quiet on the issue of resource development in the SCS, letting Vietnam take the lead, and the heat, with China. MFAT Permanent Secretary Pengiran Dato Osman Patra expanded on the SCS issue, observing that China knows its position is weak, but that the SCS issue is potentially dangerous for all involved. Countries were very active in the South Spratleys and Paracel islands. Notwithstanding this, Osman believed that it was

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still possible to do joint projects with China, which Brunei was exploring. Osman noted that the Chinese military seems to have a strong voice in China's SCS policy, but that ASEAN dialogue with China on this issue had grown more relaxed than when it first started.

¶13. (C) Pehin Lim solicited Admiral Keating's views on North Korea. In response to Keating's cautious optimism, Lim said that the North Koreans know that the nuclear issue is "the only marble they have left, so they spin it as often as they can." Lim and Osman noted the heavy indoctrination of the North Korean people was starting to crack through positive steps like the visit of the New York Philharmonic and the growing employment with South Korean businesses in the Kaesong Industrial Area.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) Our impressions of the meeting with the Sultan match those of General Halbi: Admiral Keating's visit was greeted by one of the warmest receptions we've seen or heard of for a visiting foreign military leader. The Bruneians highly value, and make good use of the limited face time they get with senior U.S. officials. Crown Prince Billah, often discounted by the diplomatic corps (and Bruneians, in private) as disinterested in policy issues, impressed us for being more engaged and on top of his briefing, indicating that he may be growing in his role as first in line to the throne. END COMMENT.

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